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Architecture as an art expression

**Courier
book
reviews**

THE PUZZLE OF ARCHITECTURE by Robin Boyd
(Melbourne University Press; 65/).

Mr Boyd's earlier writing will be known to most people inclined to read this book.

As an articulate and stimulating critic, especially in that ne-

bulous region where architecture shades into sociology, he has chastened us, educated us, and always unpatronisingly, rubbed our noses in our grosser architectural messes.

This has always been entertaining, as well as salutary.

This book is different. It has a broader educative purpose. It is not a crisp critical foray, but a basic appraisal of modern architecture as an art form.

It is not for desultory fire-side browsing, except for the pleasures of handling such a fine production and looking at the illustrations.

These are line drawings, in sepia ink, and they are numerous, expressive, and unobtrusively skilful.

The development of the themes through the text, however, is curiously hesitant, especially for such a fluent and decisive writer.

ABSENT

To underpin the thoughtful consideration of the position and function of architecture among the arts, some general theory of aesthetics, however concise, seems an essential co-ordinate of the frame of reference. This is absent.

The metaphysics of aesthetics is cautiously and obliquely invoked from time to time, when what is needed at the outset is an authoritative exposition from which the book as a whole can be developed.

Without this, the profound critical considerations raised by Mr Boyd float on an apparently nebulous footing, like the spectacular tension structures which he illustrates.

The book does provide a guide, and a clear and witty one, to the erratic paths followed by architectural theories since modern architects woke up, fifty years ago, to the rather unnerving realisation that they had their hands and their drawing offices full of the oldest and most intractable medium of artistic expression.

Mr Boyd illuminates their creditable, if somewhat febrile pursuit of an integrating con-

trol of their medium; he also shows how difficult their problems are, and how incapable of final resolution.

It emerges too — if it is not too uncharitable to say so — how unsteadily grounded in basic aesthetics were the majority of the profession.

They were often alive to their responsibilities, usually technically competent, but only occasionally were they artists.

Too often the expression of a profound artistic impulse in the building of some master architect is seized upon, and metamorphosised to a general principle for the guidance of the lesser brethren.

FASHION

This is not a use for artistic impulses, the results are artistically sterile. Worse still, this process is shown to divert the less intensely motivated practitioners towards the pursuit of mere fashionability, and away from what Mr Boyd calls the "timeless principles of good design — integrity, wholeness, and unity."

The lay reader begins to feel that the complaint of the first part of this review — a lack of viable aesthetic foundation — is possibly general in the schools.

Not that its inclusion in the syllabus would make artists out of technicians; but it would surely promote appreciation of the timeless principles of design, to which Mr Boyd is so plainly devoted, and it would help to suppress the ulterior impulses in design of which he complains — that is, commercialism, fashionability, the pursuit of a cult and so on.

It is not very important that we might then have fewer strikingly experimental roofs, which leak, but we would have a freer play of truth in this — "The only art which we cannot help experiencing" — and every part of this book shows that there is nothing closer to Mr Boyd's professional heart than this.